

The Spanish Tragedy

by Thomas Kyd

Study Guide

Theatre Pro Rata

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Thomas Kyd: a short biography and timeline

Thomas Kyd was born in the autumn of 1558; he was baptized on November 6 in the church of St. Mary Woolnoth in London. His parents were Francis Kyd and Anna Kyd; his father was a member of the Company of Scriveners of London. Scriveners were responsible for a range of secretarial and administrative duties, including the maintenance of business, judicial, and historical records for members of the nobility and governmental bodies.

At about age six, Thomas was enrolled in the Merchant Taylors' School of London, where he received an education that included Latin, Greek, music, drama, physical education, and etiquette. A grammar school education such as this was much more rigorous than the equivalent today, and students would proceed to further education at Cambridge or Oxford or to an apprenticeship in a professional guild. Kyd, like his colleague Shakespeare, did not attend University. He may have pursued a career as a scrivener for some years.

Sometime in the 1580s, Kyd served a member of the nobility (possibly as a secretary) and also began writing plays; his patron may also have sponsored a group of players. Those who have been mentioned as probable candidates for this patron are the Earl of Sussex, Lord Strange, and the Earl of Pembroke. Critic and biographer Park Honan considers Lord Strange the most likely candidate.

In late 1590 or early 1591, Kyd and Christopher Marlowe shared a writing room, and apparently wrote for the same company. Though Marlowe and Kyd both wrote plays, from what we know about them, it's probable that their personal opinions were radically different, the most glaring being Marlowe's atheism as opposed to Kyd more conventional religious beliefs. This writing fellowship led to disaster when both men became involved in a political controversy about the libel of foreigners in 1593; Kyd was arrested in May of that year and probably tortured; the ostensibly atheistical writings that were found in his lodgings he proclaimed as something left by Marlowe, whose company he had since left. Kyd's self-defense is contained in two letters of appeal written to Sir John Puckering after Marlowe's death (May 30, 1593). Though he had been cleared of any charges, he also hoped to be reinstated with his patron; in this latter endeavor he was not successful.

In 1594 he completed his final work, *Cornelia*, a translation of *Cornélie*, a tragedy by French dramatist Robert Garnier. He dedicated this to the Countess of Sussex, and in his dedication refers to his recent "afflictions of the mind," "bitter times," and "broken passions." He died in that year and was buried on August 15, age 35.

The Spanish Tragedy is the only original play by Kyd of which we have definite evidence and it continued to be popular after his death. In 1602, some additions were made to the text that extend the portrait of its hero Hieronimo. A long-standing literary tradition also credits Kyd with a lost predecessor to Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet*. The impact of *The Spanish Tragedy* is also clear from the additional revenge tragedies written and performed in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

Thomas Kyd in Elizabethan England

- 1558 Thomas Kyd born (baptised November 6).
- 1564 Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare born.
- 1565 Thomas Kyd enrolled in the Merchant Taylors' School, London.
- 1576 Blackfriars Theater in London and the Theatre in Shoreditch open, the first places in the London area to be used especially for the presentation of plays.
- 1581 The *Tenne Tragedies* of Seneca published in English.
- 1586-7 Kyd writes *The Spanish Tragedy* (some scholars say it may be as late as 1592, the year it was published; Kyd's name was not attached to the play, in any document that survives, until 1612).
- 1588 The defeat of the Spanish armada.
- 1591 Kyd and Marlowe share lodgings.
- 1593 May 12: Kyd is imprisoned in relation to an outbreak of public libels against foreigners ; ostensibly heretical wrtings are found in his lodgings and Kyd, under torture, asserts that the papers are Marlowe's.
- 1593 May 30: Marlowe dies (is murdered?) at an inn in Deptford.
- 1593 Summer? Kyd is released from prison, cleared of any charges, but is apparently unable to clear his name, nor is he able to return to the service of the noble he had previously served (various suggestions have been made about this person's identity). He translates Robert Garnier's *Cornélie* and dedicates it to the Countess of Sussex.
- 1594 August 15. Kyd is buried in St. Mary Colchurch, London.
- 1602 Revisions added to *The Spanish Tragedy*, attesting to its continued success on stage.
- 1603 Queen Elizabeth dies; James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England.
- 1616 William Shakespeare dies.

The Historical Context of the Play

The late sixteenth century was a very dramatic time in European history. The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 in Germany and spread to other countries. In England, Henry VIII initially opposed reformers, but when his personal marital crisis was not met with an appropriate response from the Catholic Church, he broke from Pope, and declared himself head of the Church in England. The short reign of his son Edward VI retained the same status, but the subsequent reign of his daughter Mary, reinstated the power of the Pope. When Elizabeth became queen in 1558, the Protestant church again became the state church. Prosecution of both Catholics and Protestants occurred during these periods.

The European Reformation, while successful in a number of countries, did not alter the power of the Catholic Church in Italy, Spain, or Portugal. Spain during this period was at its most powerful; it controlled territory from the Americas to the Philippines, to the Low Countries (which included territories now in France and Germany), to most of modern-day Italy. From 1580 to 1640, Spain also controlled Portugal and its empire. The original time frame of *The Spanish Tragedy* is linked to the Spanish triumph over Portugal. But running an empire the size of Spain's was a huge financial burden, and outbreaks of political and religious dissent created on-going problems. Queen Elizabeth supported the Protestant cause in other countries (including the Netherlands, controlled by Spain), and in 1588 in an attempt to stop this interference, King Philip II of Spain (supported by the Pope) sent the Spanish fleet, the most powerful in the world, to attack England. The Armada, in a dramatic reversal, was defeated.

Because of Spain's powerful position during this time period, the people of England had an interest in the country and its people. Kyd's choice of setting for his play was no doubt influenced by current events; most evidence indicates that it was written, and probably produced, before the events of 1588.

Revenge Tragedy as a Genre

The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote nine Latin tragedies modeled on those of the Greek Euripides, though they were written to be recited rather than acted. Elizabethan playwrights, however, assumed they were written to be performed and used them as a model for their own work. During the European Renaissance, they were translated and imitated in Italy, France, and England. The first English tragedy was *Gorboduc* (1562); these and others that followed were more strongly influenced by Italian and French versions of Senecan tragedy than by the original Latin dramas.

We don't know if Thomas Kyd was familiar with Seneca's tragedies directly, though they were published in English in 1581. The style was "in the air," and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* became an emblematic example of the genre. The theme of such tragedies involves the revenge of a father for a son, or the reverse, with the revenge often involving the ghost of the murdered man. Other elements of such dramas include the hesitation of the hero, the use of real or pretended insanity, suicide, intrigue, a clever, scheming villain, philosophic soliloquies, and the sensational use of various types of horrors.

Beginning about 1588, two different types of Senecan tragedies were written in England: the Countess of Pembroke and playwrights under her influence produced plays modeled on Robert Garnier's French Seneca tragedies, including *Cornélié*, the basis of Kyd's final work—a translation of that play into English. The second, and more significant group, including Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, combined English tragic tradition with a variation of Senecan technique. *The Spanish Tragedy* is part of this second group. One of the most significant differences between the Senecan model and these English works is that the murders and horrors occur onstage. Another early example of this style is Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1590-91), and perhaps the ultimate, brilliant example is his *Hamlet* (1599-1601)

The Spanish Tragedy: a synopsis

Andrea, a Spanish courtier, is killed in battle by Balthazar, Prince of Portugal. During his lifetime Andrea was lover of Bel-Imperia, daughter of the Duke of Castile and niece of the King of Spain. When Andrea's ghost appears before the judges of the underworld to be assigned its proper place in the world of shadows, the judges cannot agree, and send him on to their rulers, Pluto and Prosperine, who permit the ghost, accompanied by the spirit of Revenge, to return to earth to see vengeance executed on his slayer.

Balthazar, Andrea's slayer, becomes the shared prisoner of Lorenzo, Bel-Imperia's brother, and Horatio, son of Hieronimo, the marshall of Spain (a Knight Marshall serves as a judge, who hears and determines all pleas of the crown; Kyd transferred this traditional English position to Spain). The King awards the ransom to Horatio and the custody of the royal prisoner to Lorenzo. In the Duke's household, Balthazar falls in love with Bel-Imperia, and the King conceives the idea that a marriage between these two would unite the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal more firmly than a dozen wars.

Bel-Imperia, however, has secretly taken Horatio for her lover because he was Andrea's friend, defeated Balthazar in battle, and gave Andrea's body burial rites. Lorenzo, who considers Horatio an inappropriate suitor for his sister because of his lower rank, is keen to forward Balthazar's suit, and bribes Bel-Imperia's servant Pedringano to reveal the details of her meeting with Horatio. Lorenzo and Balthazar with Pedringano and Serberine, another servant, arrive at the lovers' rendezvous, hang Horatio, and imprison Bel-Imperia so that she cannot spread the truth.

Hieronimo apparently goes mad when he finds his son's body; yet he knows he must seek justice for his dead son. As a judicial official, his initial plan is to seek that justice from the King. Lorenzo pays Pedringano to kill Serberine, and then permits Pedringano to be hanged for the crime; by eliminating these witnesses, he persuades himself that the crime will remain unsolved. But a letter recounting the details of the slaying is found on Pedringano's body and brought to Hieronimo.

When, after many persuasive speeches, Bel-Imperia is released for the royal betrothal ceremonies, Hieronimo manages to meet with her long enough to plan their double revenge. He arranges a play for the entertainment of the royal guests with Lorenzo, Balthazar, Bel-Imperia, and himself as actors. During the course of the performance Hieronimo fatally stabs Lorenzo and Bel-Imperia kills Balthazar and herself. Before he attempts to hang himself, Hieronimo explains to his audience that the deeds of blood are real, not sham, and the reason for them. The party rushes down from the royal box to prevent his self-destruction before they can learn the names of his fellow conspirators. During the confusion Hieronimo finds an opportunity to stab both the Duke of Castile and himself. Revenge and Andrea have achieved their goals.

Adapted from Alice B. Fort & Herbert S. Kates, *Minute History of the Drama* (1935), posted online at: <http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/kyd002.html>

The Spanish Tragedy: Production History

The Spanish Tragedy entered the Stationers' Register and appeared in print in 1592. "The first recorded performances of *The Spanish Tragedy* were [...] in the early months of 1592 at the Rose on Bankside." Philip Henslowe, who held the early rights, recorded it as being performed by Lord Strange's Men—in fact "an amalgamation of Strange's and the Admiral's Men"—"twenty times" during that season and a further "three times in the short season of December-January 1592-3." The next record of the play being performed—also from Henslowe's Diary—refers to "the Admiral's Men's season at the Rose beginning 25 November 1596. *Jeronimo* was played first on 7 January 1597" and "twelve performances are recorded between January and July"; "in the joint season of the Admiral's and Pembroke's Men which followed, *Jeronimo* was the opening performance on 11 October 1597." (Edwards, 1959: lxvi)

The play was a box-office success at the time with "twenty-nine performances between 1592 and 1597, a record almost unsurpassed among [Henslowe's] his plays. The publication record is still more impressive, with at least eleven editions between 1592 and 1633, a tally unequalled by any of the plays of Shakespeare." (J. R. Mulryne)

The play was a success abroad too: adaptations of the play "were printed between 1618 and 1729 and performances took place from Holland to Bohemia and from Denmark to southern Germany." (Erne, 2001: 127) Schick's and Boas's exhaustive studies record performances in Germany; versions of the play were performed at Dresden (1626) by English actors, at Prague (1651) and at Lunenburg (1660). (cf. Edwards, 1959: lxvi)

The third most performed play in the London of the 1590s—after *The Jew of Malta* and *The Wise Men of West Chester* (now lost)—*The Spanish Tragedy* disappeared from the English stage with the closing of the theatres in 1642. Between 1642 and 1921 there is only one recorded performance of the play, reported by Pepys in his diary: "24 February 1667/68 at the Nursery Theatre in Hatton Garden [...] The play that had been performed by the leading actors on London's main stages for about half a century before 1642 was now played in a marginal and temporary playhouse by mediocre actors." (Erne, 2001:134-5)

The Spanish Tragedy has been revived only in amateur stage productions during the first half of the twentieth century. In most cases they were the initiative of university dramatic societies whose main aim was to "give performances of dramatic masterpieces of the past" which, as the special correspondent of *The Times* records, "could not survive the vulgar tests of the box-office." ('Oxford Summer Diversions', *The Times*, 31 July 1937, 10)

The play was also revived in radio productions by the BBC in the fifties. If in 1953 Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* was part of a revival of "unfamiliar" plays of various times and places, in 1956 the play was revived as part of a chronological series of Early English Drama.

It was only in 1973 that *The Spanish Tragedy* returned to the professional stage in the UK. Several professional productions followed in the eighties and the nineties.

[from the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, University of Warwick, which also includes a bibliography: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/kyd-spanishtragedy/performancehistory/>]

Some issues and questions to consider

The Spanish Tragedy is performed for an audience in the theatre, but also includes an audience onstage for the entire play (the ghost of Andrea and Revenge), and an additional onstage audience for Hieronimo's pageant early in the play and during the final act when the court watches Hieronimo's play-within-the-play, *Solimon and Perseda*. What effect do these multiple audiences have on your response to the play?

Early in the play, we hear three descriptions of the recent battle: one by Andrea's ghost, one by a Spanish general reporting to the King, and the third by Horatio. How do these three reports differ? Do you see any significance in those differences?

Hieronimo is the apparent hero of the play; yet by the final act, he himself is playing the role of Lorenzo when he murders the actual Lorenzo (who has assumed a role in the play parallel to that of Hieronimo's dead son Horatio). What does this say about the power of revenge and its impact on those who pursue it?

Hieronimo's apparent madness and desire for revenge in response to Horatio's murder is the central action of the play; what other characters respond strongly to Horatio's death and how is their response similar to or different from Hieronimo's?

How does the initial action, the war between Spain and Portugal, have an effect on subsequent events? Which characters are most actively involved in the political aspects of the play?

One key issue of the play is that of justice versus revenge. In an equitable political system, those guilty of murder should be tried and punished. But in a system where justice can be determined by the power of the King, who may or may not be sympathetic to a petitioner, taking justice into one's own hands may appear to be the only option. How does Kyd explore this issue in his play? Who violates the code of justice and why? Is that the only possible recourse? How do you respond as an audience member to the events in the play?

What is your response to the characters in the play? Whose actions do you consider justifiable? Whose are not? What characters are treated unjustly by others? What is the ultimate impact of the actions of the characters on the world of the play?

The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet: A Comparison

The Spanish Tragedy

Hero

Hieronimo, judicial officer of Spain, whose son Horatio is murdered

Supporters

Bel-Imperia, Isabella

Villain

Lorenzo, nephew to the King of Spain and friend to Balthazar, son of the Viceroy of Portugal

Accomplices

Balthazar, Pedringnano, Serberine

Innocent Victims

Isabella, wife of Hieronimo; the Duke of Castile, father of Lorenzo and Bel-Imperia

That Way Madness Lies

Hieronimo may (or may not) be mad; Isabella goes mad

Parallel Plotlines

When the Viceroy of Portugal believes his son Balthazar has been murdered, he almost kills the wrong man whom he believes responsible

Let's Put on a Play

Hieronimo stages a pageant at a royal banquet early in the play; in the final act he stages his revenge before members of the court

Body Count

Nine (ten if you count Andrea, who only appears as a ghost in the play)

Hamlet

Hero

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, whose father the King has been murdered

Supporters

Horatio, Ophelia

Villain

Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, now the King

Accomplices

Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern

Innocent Victims

Ophelia, beloved of Hamlet; Gertrude, mother of Hamlet and wife of Claudius

That Way Madness Lies

Hamlet may (or may not be mad); Ophelia goes mad

Parallel Plotlines

Laertes, brother of Ophelia and son of Polonius (whom Hamlet murdered), seeks revenge

Let's Put on a Play

Hamlet welcomes traveling players to Elsinore, and has them stage a play that includes elements related to the murder of his father

Body Count

Eight (nine if you count Hamlet Senior, who only appears as a ghost in the play)

Resources

Editions of the play

Revels student edition, edited by David Bevington (1996)

Scholar Press facsimile edition (1592)

New Mermaids edition, edited by B. L. Joseph (1964)

Fountainwell Drama Text edition, edited by Thomas W. Ross (1968)

Biography/Criticism

Ardolino, *Apocalypse & Armada in Kyd's Spanish Tragedy* (1995)

Edwards, Philip. *Thomas Kyd and Early Elizabethan Tragedy* (1966)

Freeman, Arthur. *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (1967)

Honan, Park. *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy* (Honan has a nice section on Kyd and his relationship with Marlowe) (2005)

Murray, Peter. *Thomas Kyd* (1969)

Nicholl, Charles. *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (1992)

Fiction

Chapman, Robin. *Christoferus, or Tom Kyd's Revenge* (1993). An "Elizabethan espionage novel," told by Kyd in the first person.

Websites of interest

on Thomas Kyd

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Kyd

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/kyd.htm>

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/elizabethan_jacobean_drama/kyd/
(this is a superb site with a text analysis activity, an interactive timeline, a bibliography, and audio and video lectures by leading experts on Kyd)

on revenge tragedy

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revenge_play

on historical issues

Tudor England: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tudor_period

The 16th century history of Spain: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habsburg_Spain

The Portuguese succession crisis of 1580:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1580_Portuguese_succession_crisis

The Spanish Armada:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Armada